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Data on Iran Understated By Secretaries

Weinberger, Shultz Didn't Press Reagan

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Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger were better informed about the secret U.S. arms sales to Iran than they have publicly disclosed but did not press President Reagan privately to reverse the high-risk policy they opposed, according to administration officials and sources close to the Tower commission.

Reagan is expected to use part of his weekly radio speech today to defend the two senior Cabinet members from the Tower board's sharp criticism that they "distanced themselves from the march of events." The special review board's report, released two weeks ago, also said Shultz and Weinberger did not fulfill their responsibility as presidential advisers to protect Reagan "from the consequences of his personal commitment to freeing the [U.S.] hostages" in Lebanon.

Both Cabinet members publicly disputed the Tower board criticisms. A detailed examination of the Tower report and other information, however, shows that there were more occasions than previously known when the two were told about the secret deals under way.

For example, after State Department aides presented evidence to Shultz in late May 1986 that, contrary to White House assurances, arms were being sold to Iran, Shultz said he would take the matter directly to Reagan, according to commission and administration sources. But the secretary told the Tower board that he was unable to reach Reagan, and he evidently did not pursue the issue.

Although the White House deliberately excluded Shultz from some intelligence information about the

Iran sales, official sources said he turned aside pleas by State Department aides who wanted him to intervene to obtain the information.

Weinberger, who did have access to intelligence details about the operation, has told investigators that he never raised objections to the arms sales in private meetings with Reagan, a close and longtime friend.

Earlier this week, White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater announced that Reagan would support the two secretaries against the Tower board criticisms during the radio speech. Reagan has "the highest confidence and trust" in Shultz and Weinberger, Fitzwater added. The defense secretary specifically asked Reagan to make a statement supporting his conduct and even suggested language to the White House for such a message.

In their defense, Shultz and Weinberger have cited their exclusion from some high-level meetings and their spotty knowledge about the arms sales to Iran. For example, the Tower report discloses that they were barred from a meeting with Reagan in May 1986 by then-national security adviser Rear Adm. John M. Poindexter. In a memo to Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, then a National Security Council aide, Poindexter wrote: "I don't want a meeting with RR [Reagan], Shultz and Weinberger."

Shultz, according to the Tower commission, "specifically requested to be informed [of the Iran arms sales] only as necessary to perform his job." The commission gave no details to buttress that statement, but a commission source said that Shultz made the disclosure.

In a news conference March 5 in Shanghai, China, Shultz said, "I took the position that I wanted to know what I needed to know and the department should know what it needed to know to do our job."

An aide to Shultz said yesterday that the secretary's statements to the Tower commission and at the Shanghai news conference were made in the context of "his continuing concern with the problem of leaks and the fact that information on sensitive operations should be on a need-to-know basis." The aide added, "It does not mean that Shultz

knew something bad was going on and didn't want to be told about it."

Shultz also told the commission that, while he voiced objection to the arms sales in three meetings involving Reagan and other advisers, he never raised the issue in his private meetings with the president, according to commission sources. The weekly one-on-one meetings in the Oval Office are considered Shultz's most important means of influencing presidential decisions and provide a key foundation for the secretary of state's authority.

Weinberger, like Shultz, had made known his opposition to the Iran sales during White House meetings. But administration officials said that once it was clear to Weinberger in early January 1986 that Reagan had decided to proceed, the defense secretary's effort was to make sure the Defense Department was not directly responsible for selling the weapons to a foreign power.

Instead, a complex arrangement was devised so that the Pentagon sold the weapons to the Central Intelligence Agency, which shipped them abroad. This was done to satisfy Weinberger's worries about his department's legal role and congressional reporting requirements, an official said.

Because the weapons had to come from U.S. military stocks under his control, Weinberger was aware of each shipment of arms to Iran, congressional sources said. Moreover, the Tower board reported that Weinberger "had access through intelligence to details about the operation," including activities outside his department.

In a news conference in Paris Dec. 2, Weinberger said his first knowledge of arms shipments to Iran came "some time in the end of January, February" of 1986. He said that "to the best of my knowledge" there had not been any earlier U.S. arms shipments "since the [1979] embargo," but qualified that later to say it did not include "black market [sales] through some arms dealers or through some other countries."

In answer to a question about whether the Pentagon was aware of the November 1985 shipment, he responded: "November '85, not that

I know of." However, the Tower board reported that Weinberger was present on Dec. 7, 1985, two weeks after the November shipment, when former national security adviser Robert C. McFarlane briefed a White House meeting on details of the Iran operation since its inception the previous summer.

Shultz, in his first public testimony on the matter last Dec. 4, told the House Foreign Affairs Committee, "I don't know much at all about the arms transfers that apparently took place in calendar year 1986. I know more about what took place in 1985 I learned in various ways of two proposed transfers during 1985. But I was never informed and had the impression that they were not consummated."

According to information in the Tower report, Shultz was involved in a long list of discussions regarding secret arms sales to Iran:

- July 14, 1985—a cable from McFarlane about an Israeli approach mentioning the supply of 100 TOW antitank missiles to Iran.

- Aug. 6, 1985—Discussion with Reagan and McFarlane of Iran's request for 100 TOW missiles in exchange for four or more U.S. hostages in a "totally deniable" operation, as Shultz's notes referred to it. Weinberger attended a separate meeting with Reagan on the subject that day.

- Nov. 18, 1985—Word from McFarlane that four hostages were to be released and that Israel would thereafter deliver 100 U.S.-supplied Hawk anti-aircraft missiles.

- Nov. 22, 1985—Word from an aide that the hostages would be released in return for 120 Hawk missiles.

- Dec. 5, 1985—A call from Poindexter reporting that a meeting was to be held with Reagan two days hence to discuss a new arms-to-Iran operation involving 3,300 TOW missiles and 60 Hawk missiles.

- Dec. 7, 1985—A White House meeting, which also included Weinberger, on arms sales to Iran. Shultz told the board that no decision was made at that meeting but that Reagan seemed "in favor of the project somehow or other."

- Jan. 5, 1986—A discussion with Poindexter on further Israeli interest in an arms-for-hostages swap.

- Jan. 7, 1986—A full-scale discussion in the Oval Office of the Iran arms initiative that included Weinberger and others.

The record shows that only in his initial contact with McFarlane in July 1985 did Shultz go along with exploring proposals regarding arms and hostages. After this, he and Weinberger consistently argued against the operation in White House meetings on the matter. Shultz also appealed to Reagan in November 1986 to prevent CIA Director William J. Casey from presenting misleading testimony about the Iran affair to the Senate intelligence committee.

The fundamental criticism of Shultz and Weinberger by the Tower board members was that, given the importance of the issue, it was not enough simply to voice opposition and take actions to protect themselves and their departments. As key foreign policy advisers to the president, the board said, "their obligation was to give the president their full support and continued advice with respect to the program or, if they could not in conscience do that, to so inform the president."

Commission sources said this point was meant to suggest that the secretaries should have considered resigning on principle. During an interview with Shultz, the board members had a sharp exchange with the secretary on this point. The confrontation and subsequent harsh words in the report about both Cabinet officers left bruises, public and private, that have not healed, commission sources said.